

## Leaven

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Volume 21

Issue 3 *A Christian Response to the Environment*

Article 3

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8-1-2013

# Making Earth Heaven: Ecological Implications of Genesis 1-3

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### Recommended Citation

Pardee, Cambry (2013) "Making Earth Heaven: Ecological Implications of Genesis 1-3," *Leaven*: Vol. 21: Iss. 3, Article 3.

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# Making Earth Heaven: Ecological Implications of Genesis 1-3

CAMBRY PARDEE

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*That earth now  
Seemed like to heav'n, a seat where gods might dwell,  
Or wander with delight, and love to haunt  
Her sacred shades: though God had yet not rained  
Upon the earth, and man to till the ground  
None was, but from the earth a dewy mist  
Went up and watered all the ground.*

—Milton, *Paradise Lost* VII<sup>1</sup>

The book of Genesis opens with the majestic phrase “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1.1).<sup>2</sup> This introduction is followed by an account of the creation of the cosmos in six days, from the separation of light and darkness to the creation of human beings. The reader may be surprised, then, to encounter a second remarkably similar introduction in Genesis 2.4b, “In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.” This, too, is followed by a narrative describing the formation of the first man and woman and their placement in the paradise of Eden. These two introductions suggest that what we have in the first three chapters of Genesis are two stories about the creation of the cosmos, each with its own unique emphasis and perspective. While the theological and anthropological facets of these narratives have been continuously discussed since the first century before Christ, their ecological implications have been mostly overlooked until recent years. In what follows, we will look at what each of these stories says about creation and how they describe humanity’s responsibility to the earth.

## **Genesis 1.1–2.4a The Human Mandate of Dominion**

In the first story (Gen 1.1–2.4a), the reader encounters a transcendent and omnipotent God, a human being endowed with the image of God, and a cosmos that is impeccably and categorically good. Six times in the opening verses God looks and sees that what he has created is good, and at the completion of creation, surveying all his work, he offers a final evaluation—it is *very* good (1.31). What is it about creation that leads God to make such an assessment? In the fourth century, Saint Augustine wrote, “All things that exist, therefore, seeing that the Creator of them all is supremely good, are themselves good.”<sup>3</sup> Around the same time, John Chrysostom claimed in a homily on Genesis that all creatures derive their goodness from the goodness of their creator.<sup>4</sup> This sort of

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1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (ed. Scott Elledge; 2d ed.; New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993).

2. Citations from the Bible are from the NRSV.

3. Augustine, *The Enchiridion: On Faith, Hope, and Love* (ed. Henry Paolucci; trans. J. F. Shaw; Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961), 12:12.

4. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17* (trans. Robert C. Hill; FC 74; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 10:127–42.

*ontological* goodness, inherent goodness simply by virtue of existence, was widely accepted by patristic and medieval theologians as the appropriate reading of Genesis 1.<sup>5</sup> In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas emphasized *order* as an additional element of the earth's goodness, saying that the "order of the universe" is the "ultimate and noblest perfection in things."<sup>6</sup> The orderliness of creation is certainly accentuated in the first creation story. On the first three days light and darkness, sea and sky, and land and vegetation are created, the appropriate environments for the entities that will be created on the last three days—the sun, moon, and stars to occupy the light and darkness, the fish and birds to inhabit the sea and sky, and animals and people to fill the land.

From the opening verses of the Old Testament we learn that humans are the pinnacle and purpose of creation, that humanity is elevated far above all other creatures and becomes God's vice-regent over the natural realm. It is this lofty estimation of humanity that caused the historian Lynn White to claim, "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."<sup>7</sup> This anthropocentrism, however, is an integral part of God's plan for the proper governing of the earth. As the pinnacle of the created order, humanity is given a special charge over the earth and its living creatures. Just as the luminaries are created to rule over the day and night (1.16–18), so are people created to rule over all living creatures. Genesis 1.26–28 records God's twofold mandate to humans to have dominion over and to subdue the earth.

Genesis 1.26 reads, "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion (*rādāh*) over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'" What are we to understand by this imperative of *dominion*, a term that can so easily be understood and applied negatively? Some have argued that the term *dominion* does not imply an abusive or exploitative rule, but rather the rule of a benevolent king.<sup>8</sup> While this is potentially true in this case, the use of this term throughout the Old Testament suggests that *dominion* was commonly understood to refer to complete and oftentimes deleterious hegemony. The term is used four times in Leviticus, three of those times in association with *severity* or *harshness* (Lev 25.43, 46, 53; cf. Ezek 34.4), the same word used to describe the brutality of the Egyptian enslavement of the Hebrews (Exod 1.13–14). In Numbers 24.19 *dominion* is associated with the razing of a city and in Isaiah 14.6 with anger and fury. Indeed, of the 20 occurrences of the term in the Old Testament outside of Genesis 1, only six of them are in a context where dominion is not *explicitly* violent or oppressive (1 Kgs 4.24, 5.16, 9.23; Pss 68.27, 72.8; 2 Chr 8.10).

We encounter a similar problem with the second part of the mandate, *to subdue*. In Genesis 1.28 we read, "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it (*kābash*); and have dominion over (*rādāh*) the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" In this case there is no denying the inherent violence of the term, almost exclusively used in the Old Testament to describe the activity of conquering foreign lands (Gen 1.28; Num 32.22, 29; Josh 18.1) and enslaving their inhabitants (Jer 34.11, 16; Neh 5.5, 2 Chr 28.10). Is God really authorizing humans to invade and conquer the earth and enslave the creatures he has only just finished creating and so directly pronounced good? Perhaps there is an alternative way to contextualize dominion and subjection.

Both parts of humanity's mandate toward the earth have the potential to connote harsh and exploitative rule; however, they must be redefined in light of the paradigm of divine mastery and dominion. In Genesis 1, God is a royal figure, an omnipotent Creator reigning over the cosmos, separating light from darkness and water from land with the regal power and ease of a king issuing decrees with a mere word. His dominion over creation is demonstrated in his care and orderliness, first establishing hospitable habitats and then filling them with their proper creatures. Humanity's commission of dominion is rooted in the example of God's dominion and is subsidiary to the creation of humanity in God's image. Humans are not simply one kind of creature

5. For a valuable resource on patristic and medieval perspectives on the environment see Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles II* (trans. The English Dominican Fathers; London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1923), 45.10:108.

7. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–1207.

8. Roger E. Timm, "Let's Not Miss the Theology of the Creation Accounts," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 13 (1986): 97–105.

among others, even if the last and greatest. In Genesis 1.26, God announces a plan to make something different from his previous creations, to create humankind *in his own image*; in 1.27 God acts on that plan. Dominion is enclosed in the *Imago Dei*, reminding us that the human role on earth is intimately related to God's role on earth. Just as humans are made in the image of God, so ought their dominion over the earth to be carried out in the image of God's dominion—a dominion not of *destruction*, but of care, order, and *creation*.

Without reference to the divine exemplar of *dominion*, the bipartite command “to have dominion” and “to subdue” has the potential to detrimentally impact the way Christians interact with the environment. In fact, according to White, Genesis 1.26–28 is responsible for much of the destruction of nature in modern times, providing ample justification for using the earth simply as a resource to be spent. Indeed, many of those who seek to find a message of environmental stewardship and ecological sensitivity in the Bible have relinquished Genesis 1 to those who would use it as a divine authorization for the exploitation of the earth. In doing so, however, they cede one of the key components of the biblical message that suggests the gravity of human responsibility to the earth—that all created things are *good*. Goodness is not a matter of usability or profitability: goodness is the state of being in which all of creation was established, and it is over this *good* earth that humanity is to rule in the image of God and as God's entrusted regents.

### Genesis 2.4b–3.24 The Human Vocation of Service

If the value of the first account is found in its depiction of the relationship between *God* and creation, the strength of the second account is its portrayal of the relationship between the *human* and creation. In Genesis 2.4b–3.24, the reader encounters an immanent God who molds a man from the dust of the ground and walks with him in the garden. Theodore Hiebert, like many Christian ecologists, prefers the second creation narrative to the first, deriving from it a human vocation of cooperation with the earth.<sup>9</sup>

The intimate relationship between humans and the earth is emphasized by the linguistic connection between the terms for *human* (*'ādām*) and *earth* (*'ādāmāh*)—a Hebrew pun that is by no means incidental or insignificant. From the *earth* God molds an *earth-creature*. These terms underline on a semantic level the intrinsic dependence of humans upon the earth and the earth upon humans. This reciprocal relationship is clarified in Genesis 2.5–7, “In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, *and there was no one to till the ground*...then the LORD God formed man *from the dust of the ground*...” (emphasis added). In addition to God's providential care and sustenance, the land also requires human work and service if it is to be fruitful. There is no shrub on the ground because there is no one to till it, and there is no one to till it until a man is molded from the ground.

In addition to being mutually dependent on the land, the author also demonstrates that the human vocation is to be a servant to and keeper of the earth. In Genesis 2.15 we read, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it (*'āvad*) and keep it (*shamar*).” The Hebrew verb that is rendered in English to *till* literally means “to work” or “to serve,” and is used in many contexts including agriculture, service and slavery, and ritual service to a deity. Adam is placed in the garden to work the land as a farmer, and so becomes a servant to the land. His second job is to *keep* the land, a term which also means to protect, guard, and preserve. Adam is a servant and worker of the land but also its steward, delegated to keep it, preserve it, and protect it from harm. Adam's task, and the vocation of all humanity, is to serve and preserve—even conserve—the land.

This task of working and preserving the earth is not confined to the Garden of Eden and the world in its paradisiacal state before Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. After the deceit of the serpent and the rebellion of the man and woman God curses the ground so that human labor will be spent in toilsome exertion (Gen 3.17). And yet, we read in Genesis 3.23, “Therefore, the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till (*'āvad*) the ground from which he was taken.” Even outside of the garden, after humanity's disobedience and expulsion from paradise, after sin has entered into the world, the ground is cursed, and the image of God is marred, the human vocation remains identical to the human calling in paradise—to serve and keep the land.

9. Theodore Hiebert, “The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions,” in *Christianity and Ecology* (ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 135–154.

## Humanity's Ecological Mandate and Vocation

Genesis 1–3 offers two perspectives on humanity's responsibility to the earth. In the first account humans are mandated as God's vice-regents to have dominion over God's good creation; in the second they are called as responsible stewards to work and preserve the land. With these two biblical perspectives on human obligation to creation in mind, we turn now to some of the implications of these passages for Christian ecology and a biblical ethic of sustainability.

How do these two visions of human responsibility fit together? Many biblical scholars, noting the differences between the first and second accounts, have suggested that they are the work of two separate authors. Julius Wellhausen, a German scholar who articulated the classic formulation of the Documentary Hypothesis, designated the author of the second older account the "Yahwist" and the author of the first account the "Priestly writer."<sup>10</sup> Clearly dividing the two accounts on literary grounds provides solutions to the compositional problems of Genesis 1–3 (and the rest of the Pentateuch), but in so doing creates a new problem for readers of the Bible who hope to find a coherent ecological message. If the stories are severed, then their ecological entreaties of dominion and service also become separated. One must acknowledge the unique contributions of each account as it stands on its own and at the same time contextualize their distinct messages in light of their juxtaposition and unification in the Bible. After all, these two accounts of creation are united in scripture.

The two stances toward the environment are placed side by side in scripture, not competing with but complementing each other. Dominion over the earth as demonstrated in the careful ordering of the natural realm in the first account resonates with the serving stewardship expected of Adam in the second account. Adam's duty to work and conserve the garden is all the more consequential given the inherent goodness of all created things. Even the thorns, thistles, and sweaty toil that characterize human labor outside of the garden do not nullify the goodness of the earth—indeed, they make the necessity to subdue the land all the more understandable. Caring for creation is no longer the idyllic occupation of Adam and Eve in paradise: it is the struggle to preserve our earth from the corruption that afflicts it as a result of sin. The two visions of humanity's duty to the earth are unique but also united in the common exhortation to all people to reign beneficently over this good earth with the constant aim of working the land while preserving its goodness.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton's epic poem based on the opening chapters of Genesis, the poet says that Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden summons Sin and Death, the odious offspring of Satan, from the gate of hell into God's pristine new world. Milton writes about Death that, while following his mother Sin across the abyss to earth, "with delight he snuffed he snuffed the smell / of mortal change on earth."<sup>11</sup> According to the poem, as a result of sin and the subsequent cursing of the ground, the earth was modified and transformed into an inhospitable place where sin and death find a home and immortality is changed to mortality. The apostle Paul seems to have understood God's curse of the land similarly, writing that "creation was subjected to futility" (Rom 8.20). But ever is there hope, and hope does not disappoint us. Paul goes on to say that at the revealing of the children of God "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom 8.21). This is the hope toward which a Christian environmental ethic must set its gaze, to the goal of freeing creation from its present decay, to restoring the goodness of the earth through benevolent dominion and constant stewardship. In Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton captures this hope for creation in the words of the Almighty, who says that through humanity's long obedience might "earth be changed to heav'n, and heav'n to earth." Christian ecology is established on this very hope and a biblical environmental ethic takes as its mission this very task—the task of making earth like to heaven.

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10. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel: With a Reprint of the Article Israel from the Encyclopedia Britannica* (trans. J. Sutherland Black and A. Menzies; *ML* 6; New York: Meridian Books, 1957).

11. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 10.